

HUMAN FREEDOM, AUTHENTICITY AND NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE: A CRITICAL STUDY IN JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Sartre posited the idea of freedom as the essence of man and the struggle of man to attain fulfilment as authentic human being. He as one of the fathers of existentialism insisted that it is authenticity that propels man to dig deep into his creative prowess to become a better version of himself and this authenticity is impossible without freedom. This paper examines Sartre's theory of freedom and authenticity and its relevance in the contemporary Nigerian society and finds out that human person develops better and authentically within the ambience of inalienable human freedom and autonomy properly expressed in existence.

Keywords: Freedom, Authenticity, Nigeria, Jean-Paul Sartre, Philosophy

Introduction

Human freedom and authenticity are the major themes in existentialism where man is considered to be incomplete until he strives to attain self-fulfilment which amounts to freedom. Freedom is seen, here, as a necessary instrument through which man can bring himself to perfection or authenticity. It was in agreement with this that Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* (1976) maintained that man begins to be human when he exercises his freedom which is identical with his consciousness, thus "One must be conscious in order to choose and one must choose in order to be conscious. Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing" (p. 585).

Freedom, here is seen as a weapon and a tool for self-defence, as well as an instrument to achieve purpose and aim, and it is this ability to choose that shows freedom. Sartre believes that the core of human freedom is made manifest in choice. Therefore any attempt to evade

choice is a kind of subhuman existence. This type of creativity that comes from the ability to choose is what leads to authenticity because if man is absolutely free, then he can do whatever he likes.

This paper takes a cursory glance at Sartre's concept of freedom and authenticity, evaluating the impact of such canons in the contemporary world.

On Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre was a French philosopher, playwright, novelist, political activist, biographer, and literary critic born on 21 June, 1905. He was one of the key figures in the philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology, and one of the leading figures in 20th-century French philosophy and Marxism. His work has also influenced sociology, critical theory, post-colonial theory, and literary studies, and continues to influence these disciplines.

Sartre was also noted for his open relationship with prominent feminist and fellow existentialist philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir. Together, Sartre and de Beauvoir challenged the cultural and social assumptions and expectations of their upbringings, which they considered bourgeois, in both lifestyle and thought. The conflict between oppressive, spiritually destructive conformity (*mauvaise foi*, literally, "bad faith") and an "authentic" way of "being" became the dominant theme of Sartre's early work, a theme embodied in his principal philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre's introduction to his philosophy is his work *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946), which was originally presented as a lecture.

Sartre wrote successfully in a number of literary modes and made major contributions to literary criticism and literary biography. His plays are richly symbolic and serve as a means of conveying his philosophy. The best-known, *No Exit* (1962), contains the famous line "Hell is other people." Aside from the impact of *Nausea* (1938), Sartre's major work of fiction was *The Roads to Freedom* (1945) trilogy which charts the progression of how World War II affected

Onebunne Human Freedom, Authenticity and Nigerian ... Sartre's ideas. In this way, *The Roads to Freedom* presents a less theoretical and more practical approach to existentialism.

He was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature but refused it, saying that he always declined official honours and that "a writer should not allow himself to be turned into an institution" ('Jean- Paul Sartre', Wikipedia). He died on 15 April, 1980.

Human Freedom in Existentialism

Existentialism can be described as that system of philosophy whose main aim is the existence of man as he manifests himself in multi-dimensional aspects. It has as its aim the search for the meaning or purpose of human life with the view of justifying the existence of man through subjective experience. This is why existentialism is generally concerned with the freedom of the individual as that which distinguishes him from all other beings. Thus, freedom is the fulcrum on which all the teachings of the existentialists of both theistic and atheistic beliefs are anchored. It is this special emphasis on freedom from the practical perspective that distinguishes existentialism from other philosophical systems which have tried to solve the problem of human freedom. Existentialists are of the opinion that freedom as expressed in the individual's power of choice is the core of human existence. Commenting on this point, Warnock (1970) writes:

We can say that the common interest which unites existentialist philosophers is the interest in human freedom. They are all of them interested in the world considered as the environment of man, who is treated as a unique object of attention, because of his power to choose his own courses of action. What his freedom of choice amounts to and how it is to be described... (p. 1)

Thus, it is this exercise of freedom and the ability to shape the future that differentiates man from other beings and through free and responsible decisions, man becomes authentically himself.

Existentialism as a philosophical system emerged in Europe after the Second World War (1939-1945) owing to the nasty state of affairs that resulted from the war. The war created an atmosphere where human life was so invaluable and religion became a hopeless venture for many who lost faith. In the midst of this wretchedness, existentialism arose.

Existentialism stressed the uniqueness and value of the individual human being and opposed the idea of an established moral law which binds on everybody because it limited the freedom of the individual. In their view, man's freedom is limitless as man creates himself without any prior objective value. Man makes his own choices for which he is responsible. Radhakrishnan (1953) emphasises this by remarking: "My choices and decisions are quite personal. No God or absolute decides in me but I do it on my own account" (p. 425). Sartre, like other existentialists, dealt with the problem of freedom. Unlike them, however, he maintains that 'man is condemned to be free' and remarks: "If man is not free, then his liberation would not make sense" (Manser, 1960, p. 114).

For Sartre, choice is one of the basis of human freedom which is inseparable from his existence. Consequently, he establishes the fact that man in so far as he exists is free because freedom is the being of man. As a result, he asserts that, "Thus, freedom is not a being; it is the being of man – i.e. his nothingness of being." (p. 441).

For Sartre, freedom is synonymous with action. Hence the first condition of action is the freedom of the acting being and the means to act. In his own words:

It is strange that philosophers have been able to argue endlessly about determinism and free-will, to cite an example in favour of one or the other thesis without ever attempting first to make explicit the structures contained in the very idea of action (p. 433).

One of the greatest power of existentialism is the emphasis laid on man's power of choice. Sartre uses man's ability to choose to prove human freedom though not in contradiction to freedom as the capacity

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to act. According to Sartre, man is always found within a situation and every situation confronts man with many options from which man cannot avoid choosing. In the same vein, Warnock (1967) writes that:

We fill our lives by freely choosing not only what to do, but also what to feel, and think, what to believe and how to describe things (p. 29). Thinking along the same line, Grimsley (1960) observes: Freedom... is the choice of our being (as 'brave', 'cowardly', 'generous'...) but it is not the basis of its own being.... (p. 135).

Choice, in effect, is the cornerstone of a free action and free being. And since choice is ubiquitous and to live authentically man needs neither human nor super human forces to choose for him, to avoid choice is to be infected with the Sartrean contagion of 'bad faith' or inauthentic existence.

Sartre's notion of freedom is drawn from his theory of man namely: 'in-itself' and 'for-itself' with the former referring to the unconscious aspect of man (the physical) and the latter to consciousness which is identical with freedom. This interpretation of man by Sartre is described as atheism and humanism, the first because man is absolutely free creates his own reality and the second because man has wisdom enough to create values. Although the freedom of *for-itself* is more important to our discussion, the *in-itself* influences the other self in no small measure because the *for-itself* (the physical body) exists before the *in-itself*. The apparent contradiction which might result from this is resolved by Sartre when he remarked:

Being in-itself is diametrically opposed to Being for-itself. The in-itself is a world of objects that simply are what they are. They obtrude with a solidity and permanence which are the very opposite of the for-itself's lack of stability (p. 291)

According to Sartre, there is no human nature, rather the being of man is characterised by this unstable and ever dynamic condition known as *being-for-itself* which is identical to freedom or consciousness.

Following the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Sartre asserted that consciousness is always consciousness of something. Hence, as consciousness, being-for-itself always tends towards an object which is quite different from and external to itself, this object of consciousness can either be the in-itself which is opposed to for-itself or another of its kind. Thus the summary of consciousness from the point of view of the object to be transcended is that man in every circumstance is aware of something i.e. the object of consciousness. It is man's ability to go beyond himself and unite with that which he is yet to be. Thus: Consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself (Sartre in Lescoe, 1971, p. 281). Both nothingness and consciousness are complementary in the exercise of freedom, on this note Warnock (1965) writes:

Thus consciousness knowingly places itself at a distance from its objects, it distinguishes between itself and that which it is conscious of. And the very making of this distinction creates a gap, a distance between thought and its object (p. 43).

Nevertheless, consciousness has the power of affirming or denying, of accepting what is true of its objects and also of conceiving what is false. It is the centre of creativity in the *for-itself*. On a similar note, nothingness as a source of freedom can be described as the 'not-yet-but-transcending-state' of the *for-itself*. It is used to depict the being of man who is not what he is and is what he is not.

The idea of consciousness and nothingness are very vital in our understanding of the Sartrean notion of freedom which for him is consequent upon the nature of man. Thus, man's incompleteness or lack and abandonment in a hostile world makes his freedom a necessity. However, Sartre in portraying man (the *for-itself*) as an absolute freedom recognised certain problems which he regards as natural impediments to freedom.

Authenticity

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The term 'authenticity' simply means that quality of 'being genuine', 'real' or 'true to self'. According to the traditional philosophers, the essence of man is rationality, which implies that man's action in so far as it reflects this nature is genuine. But reversing this order, Sartre posited freedom as the essence of man. In other words, the being of man is freedom since it is on this that his whole activities are rooted. Following this therefore, authenticity consists of man's capacity to accept his nature as that of choice-making. It is the acknowledgement of human reality as a lack which needs to be filled through the power of choice by the individual. It means therefore that the possibility of genuine choice which validates freedom, presupposes the removal of self-deception. Thus, authenticity would be a:

... mode of life in which distinction between choice and non-choice is rigorously enforced and in which every choice is individual in character (Olafson, 1967, p. 138).

In other words a clarion call for an authentic life involves the ability to make genuine choice which can help man to attain his goal. This involves the manifestation of the individual's self-creativity as a means to surpassing his present situation. Thus, choice which is the basis of freedom for Sartre plays a vital role in the attainment of an authentic life.

According to Flew (1979), authenticity is defined as:

...the potentiality for action, characterized by its orientation towards the future, entailing possibilities and constant necessity of choice (p.133).

Men cannot avoid making choices that are authentic. But authenticity does not just mean choosing anything. It means also choosing that which will help man to attain the goal or his final perfection. As a result of this, it involves the full responsibility of the choosing agent.

In the words of Lepp,

Man's authenticity is measured in the degree of his participation in the realities

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of his times. He cannot pass through the
world as a mere spectator but must play
his part in the great human drama (p. 23).

This boils down to the single principle of decisive action. The individual is said to be authentic only if he actively involves himself in making choices and absorbing as it were the pressures of responsibilities and risks demanded by the situation.

Sartre's notion of authenticity is not a moral issue which involves good or bad, right or wrong, but the consciousness of being. The crucial point then oscillates not in ethical principles of good or bad actions but in gaining immediacy of experience which is more important/ than absolutes. However, Sartre observed that the doctrine of authenticity does not mean a kind of personal ethics: it involves one's attitude towards others. For instance, in choice making, I have discovered that the choices I make are not made for myself alone but also for others. So, even though Sartre believes that a cordial and mutual relationship is not possible in human interaction, he agrees that: "...to be authentically human... relationships must be founded on reciprocity or equality." (Sartre in Aaron, 1970, p. 168).

Nevertheless, this principle synchronises with the golden rule of Christ or the Kantian moral law which enjoins that humanity should not be treated as a means only but as an end in all, that is to say 'do unto others as you would like them to do unto you' (Matthew 7:12).

It should be noted, however, that authenticity is not restricted to individuals since an oppressed group where individuals suffer violent deprivation of human rights and dehumanisation has only one option of striving through collective liberation to restore the individual dignity. According to Sartre, members of such an oppressed class must converge their individual project to a point of violent rejection of their social structure.

Therefore, Sartre's notion of authenticity as the fulfilment of freedom is based on the fact that the individual has an unlimited capability of self-development. But he observed that man unfortunately buries his talents with him. Since man is free, he has an avalanche of opportunities of making himself what he pleases. So for man to be

Onebunne Human Freedom, Authenticity and Nigerian ... truly authentic, he should not look for any help either in heaven or on earth, but rely on his power of freedom which for Sartre is absolute. Thus, to cringe at any situation insurmountable is to lapse into inauthenticity.

Impediments to Authenticity or Freedom

In a bid to establish human freedom on a solid ground, Sartre had outlined three kinds of freedom which he believes to be peculiar to man: the freedom of will or metaphysical freedom; freedom from any authoritative source of moral guidance; and freedom as the foundation of values.

Sartre observed that there are certain natural impediments to freedom which at the same time impedes the personal endeavour to be authentic. These impediments form part of the world which the individual must exist. Nevertheless, Sartre insists that these impediments do not restrict our freedom, but rather enhances it because these impediments are nothing but the totality of the connatural factors that coexist with us, such as place of birth, sex, environment, others, death, etc.; and that the meanings that these impediments bear arise from us because we are the ones that assign meaning to these facilities. Commenting on this Sartre (1976) remarks:

The 'coefficient of adversities' in things cannot be an argument against our freedom for it is by us, that is, by the preliminary positing of an end that this coefficient of adversity arises (p. 482).

Thus freedom and its natural impediments or facticities play a complementary role: one assigns meaning to the other while the other manifests and makes the exercise of the one possible. Sartre identifies the following facticities:

➤ My Place

For Sartre, this represents the location or spot that an individual occupies in the world and includes the topography, climate, vegetation, weather, etc. of the area. According to him, my place has meaning

only with regard to my goal and so it is not a limiting factor to my freedom especially the internal freedom which is freedom of choice and imagination. So, it is possible that the same place has different meanings for different people, based on the things they desire to achieve.

➤ My Past

As a constituent structure of my facticity, my past includes every past experience and encounter that I have had. However, Sartre insists that things of the past have very little implications on the present. He agrees that they might have some influence over one's actions but maintains that they only have the meanings that we choose to attach to them, then he adds:

Who shall decide whether the period which I spent in prison after a theft was fruitful or deplorable? ...It is I always, according to the ends by which I illuminate these past events (Sartre, 1976, p. 499).

➤ My Environment

Not to confuse this with my place, while my environment has to do with how I interact with other things, both human and non-human, my place has to do with my location. The idea is that eventualities are bound to spring up from my environment at any time:

Just as the Romans reserved in their temples a place for the unknown gods, so in my project a certain margin of indeterminable was created, for the unpredictable (p. 506).

➤ My Fellowmen

Sartre's idea of my fellowmen follows that other people, referred to as 'others', are also beings that are entitled to their freedom and authenticity as I am to mine. In the course of our existence, the others pose threats to my freedom, thus Sartre proclaims "the other is hell". This only means that if the existence of the others (with the possibility

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that they might want something I want and threaten my freedom) is
hell to me, I too am hell to the others.

As the struggle for survival continues with one's fellowmen in an already formed system like the world, it becomes impossible for individual authenticity to be achieved. For instance, the laid down rules or norms of the society into which I am born have to be accepted though I was not a party to it. Moreover, the others' judgement of me questions my authenticity.

➤ My Death

For Sartre death is the annihilation of all possibilities and termination of future plans but it does not constitute an impediment to freedom since it lies outside the ontological structure of man. So, unlike other impediments, it is only death that one does not stay to discuss after experiencing it. Sartre argues that one cannot claim to die for another since the death of the one does not guarantee the 'undeath' of the other.

The Rapport between Freedom and Authenticity

Freedom and authenticity form an integral part of human reality in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. They complement each other. Thus, while freedom is the essence of man, the striving and advancement of man towards self-actualisation and fulfilment make up authenticity.

Sartre noticed, however, that while it is possible to conceive freedom without authenticity, it is not possible to conceive authenticity without freedom. This is because the being of man is freedom but it is the exercise of his freedom that brings about authenticity. Thus, while all men are free, not all men are authentic. Hence:

The only authentic and genuine way of life
is that freely chosen by each individual for
himself (Stevenson, 1974, p. 89).

From the above, we see that freedom constitutes the foundation and dynamics of Sartre's existentialist authenticity.

Contemporary Relevance in the Nigerian Experience

The contemporary world has made enormous progress in science and technology. Through the scientific ingenuity of man, seas have been explored, space has been colonised by satellites and humans have mastered the science of organic cloning. Man has learned to tap natural resources for his welfare, medicines have been manufactured capable of curing unimaginable diseases and complicated machines have been designed to ease stress. To acquire power and dominate others, nuclear weapons and hydro-chemical missiles have been manufactured and every, we hear of incredible advancements in phones capable of doing the unimaginable. All these are attributed to man's unlimited freedom of creativity held by Sartre. It is, however, difficult to place Nigeria as the propellers of any of the above advancements. Nigeria is still a 'developing' nation. As other countries move toward record breaking achievements, Nigeria remains in self-imposed stalled growth.

Sartre, identified different modes in which freedom can be inauthentic. He identified the role-players (people who lose their personalities playing a role), the gossipers (who strive to hear what others say about them or other people) and the 'dead' (who allow themselves to be led by others). Those who are identified as 'dead' subsume themselves under the rule or control of others. Freedom is the essence of man and any who refuses to exercise this freedom is said to be dead, that is, inauthentic. Nigeria is in this 'dead' mode of inauthenticity but it is not for lack of opportunities that Nigeria is in the position that she is in.

It is unfortunate that Nigeria has had the worst kind of leaders who have done more harm than good. Nigerian leaders only seek to exercise their freedom against the freedom of the masses. This has weakened the authenticity of Nigerians as their freedom is limited. Thus, instead of exercising their freedom and becoming creators, Nigerians have subsumed themselves to be led by the developed nations who are only too happy to exercise their own freedom over Nigerians.

Conclusion

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The beginning and end of man, according to Sartre, is freedom and authenticity is what evolves man from the ordinary to the extraordinary; and from the natural to the supernatural. Failure to exercise the freedom that is inherent in us; or the inability to refuse control is actually a choice to be 'dead'. The Nigerian experience illustrates the consequences of choosing to ignore our inherent freedom.

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